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THE MOTIVES TO MORAL CONDUCT.*

EVERY principle that aspires to dominance among mankind must make it its first aim to gain over the convictions, to win the intellectual adherence of men; only from this point, by a gradual growth inwards, can it conquer their hearts. It must make its appearance, not indeed with a scholastically pruned and petrified dogma, but with a clear and luminous conception to be taught to the world. For the single sympathetically disposed mind this is not, indeed, necessary; considered, however, from the point of view of society at large, the victory of the doctrine must precede the victory of the sentiment. It is my unalterable conviction that this holds good of the principle of ethical culture. We must endeavor to reach a definite formulation of our attitude towards fundamental questions. To these fundamental questions belong in especial the following three: first, the ethico-social question how society should be constituted in order to render the moral will possible to all; secondly, the question, in many respects so infinitely difficult, as to the specific demands of the ethical law; thirdly, the question as to what impulse of the will we must regard preponderant and decisive in accordance with the constitution of human nature in the establishment of moral sentiment.

As long as no considerable concurrence of opinion is attained with respect to these fundamental points of doctrine, the ethical movement cannot, in my belief, be accounted a mature reformatory principle in which the future of mankind is wrapped up, but only as the promising germ out of which, some day, as we all hope, the principle of human regeneration will grow. Whoever fails to perceive this, and fancies that we need only secure emphatic and repeated recognition for the demands of ethics, however they be interpreted; whoever fails to accept the necessity of reconstructing ethically the foundations of the social order, and of establishing the

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existence of a natural motive to morality among men, exposes himself to a just reproach which has found an apt, if not courteous, formula in the epithet of "moral clericalism."

To put a mite in contribution, then, towards preparing the way for this deeper agreement, at least in respect to *one* of the questions in point, is the purpose of the present address. No one can be more impressed than I with the difficulty of undertaking even thus to prepare the way for such an agreement; no one more intimately persuaded that we have not here a matter in which everything can be achieved by one magical stroke; no one more certain that there is here a call for that untiring labor which, as Schiller so magnificently says:

"Zu dem Bau der Ewigkeiten
Zwar Sandkorn nur um Sandkorn reicht,
Doch von der grossen Schuld der Zeiten
Minuten, Tage, Jahre streicht."

Let us address ourselves to the special question, whether there is any motive which can, according to the constitution of human nature, primarily or even exclusively be relied upon for the establishment of morals. It is the question to which Schopenhauer's apt saying refers: "To preach morality is easy; to reason out its foundation, hard."

In order to secure the proper basis for a reply to this question, we must first of all try to attain a comprehensive survey of the chief acts in which moral will or sentiment actually appears, of the chief motives to morality that present themselves in experience. Then, perhaps, by testing these actual elements of the case, we can extricate from the complex mass that motive which has the deepest warrant in human nature. We have thus to adopt at first the procedure of natural science, as it were, a procedure, complete as possible, of mere description and report, that afterwards, with the view of the facts thus obtained, we may apply a critical standard, and in the multiplicity of the actual detect the unity of the normal.

I.

When, now, we look about among the actual motives to the Good, our attention is arrested at the outset by the most

conspicuous of them—one operative in some cases with an exceptional intensity—I mean *religious conviction*. Not every religion is morally effective. The first prerequisite for the moral effectiveness of a religion is that the demand which the Deity imposes upon man should not merely have for its content certain ceremonial attestations of honor or morally indifferent, still less morally culpable, actions, but that it should coincide in content with the moral law. Here, also, there are two grades: a lower, on which the Deity is conceived as contented with certain *external* marks of justice, goodness, and charity; and a higher, on which the saying applies: “We human creatures see what is before our eyes, but God sees the heart;” where, accordingly, the demand is for a moral regeneration of *spirit*. A further gradation appears in religious faith in the varying cases where we see operating in feeling and will as the ground of submission to the divine command, now the fear of avenging displeasure, now gratitude for benefits received, now even the mystical craving to become one with the Source of Being. In all these cases, however, the fundamental prerequisite for the establishment of ethical relations by religious means is that the will of the Deity should be conceived as an ethical will—such a will as requires of man not so much certain special acts as a general assiduity in moral courses.

A second point of view finds expression in the formula that we must do good for good’s sake. The motive of moral conduct, according to this principle, is in no sense one’s own profit, be it ever so ennobled and spiritualized, but the profit of others. It is the principle of *selflessness* in its strictest sense; whoever acts according to it does not pursue his own interests, his own happiness; he acts, as it were, out of the mind of others, makes the desires, endeavors, and motives of others his own. He has passed, as it were, out of his own integument; he is, lives, and strives not in himself, but in others.

Some ethical philosophers locate the motive of moral conduct, as it were, in the logical understanding, regarding an immoral act as a blunder of logical judgment. This conception has been advanced in different forms, of which the most

celebrated is Kant's Categorical Imperative. Kant bases the moral law upon the need on the part of reason to keep free, even in action, from self-contradiction: to order action so that one can desire the maxim of one's own course to become a universal law. Self-contradiction, so intolerable to the theoretic reason, is thus made a motive for a course of action moving in the direction in which the agent desires that the general action should move.

A fourth motive is that of *individual profit* in the fullest sense, in especial, the expectation of reciprocal action from others. It is the point of view of the *do ut des*, of the *Eine Hand wäscht die andere*. It starts from the assumption that every one sees that he cannot get on alone in the pursuit of his interests in the world, but is thrown at every step on others for assistance. From this point of view the human community appears as a great incorporation for the performance of reciprocal service, for the universal insurance of reciprocity; a man's moral action is action for his own profit; above all, it is a perpetual means of courting a return of service. His motive is his own well-being in the large sense, especially the hope that others will be shrewd enough to see that a return of service is demanded for their own advantage.

A fifth and highly important motive to morality is sympathy. Early in the higher animal nature we find this faculty of recognizing the painful situations of other creatures,—whether by the accompanying manifestations of feeling or by the perception of the painful character of the situation itself,—of entering imaginatively into the state of feeling or the imperilled position of the other, and, moved by the distress thus engendered, coming to its assistance. As soon as intelligence and imagination are sufficiently developed to allow of a creature putting itself in another's place, and emotion sufficiently sensitive and undistracted to enable it to *feel* what is imagined, attempts of animals to come to the relief of each other will make their appearance. It is almost exclusively in the form of sympathetic *suffering* that sympathy leads to ethical actions; only indirectly and by accident can sympathetic *pleasure*, such as pleasure in the

improved estate of another which is not yet actual but only conceived, give rise to action for his well-being.

Still another motive we have in a force that powerfully determines the will from the very beginning of life,—the growth of habit. "Habit is second nature," runs an old and true saying. Numerous influences have a habit-forming effect, those especially which shape the still plastic and youthful mind—example and model, experience and romance, the approval and the disapproval of authoritative persons exercised directly on the sentiments and acts of him who is to be affected, or on those of others who fall within the range of his thought, and, last of all, censure and punishment. The more receptive and plastic the individual is himself, and the more emphatic and lasting the habit-forming influences, the more deeply and indelibly will the process of habituation do its work. The acquisition of moral habit is one of the most powerful causes of whatever moral elements are actually present in civilized mankind. There can hardly be an individual in the civilized world who grows up wholly without influences that tend to form in him moral habits.

The part that habituation plays in the *single life* is played in the *race* with an infinitely extended scope by that precipitate from the formation of habit through whole series of generations, which by heredity is converted into *impulse*. If the theory of heredity be a true part of the doctrine of evolution, as we cannot doubt, there takes place through inheritance a cumulative strengthening of the qualities proper to civilization, and especially, too, an advance of the *moral*, or, as the unhandsome but now adopted phrase of Comte's has it, the "altruistic" *impulses*. With some optimistic exaggeration, the thought of the inheritance of moral impulse was uttered already in the saying of Goethe :

"Wenn nur die Eltern erzogen wären
Sie könnten erzogene Kinder gebären."

Still another source from which some portion of moral good flows among mankind is subjection to the dominant custom. I do not speak here of this subjection where it is simply the

work of habit, or where it springs out of fear of social disadvantages, still less where it is the result of conscious moral subordination. The case to be considered here is that in which the rule is observed for the sake of honor, or, as the characteristic phrase is, for shame's sake; that is, from reluctance to incur the deprecatory judgments of others. If we count subjection to the dominant custom as morality, we must not have in mind the observation of external social forms. These do, indeed, in their original meaning express moral sentiments; but they have so far sunk in their transmission to the level of mere forms, that we can hardly ascribe to them any longer the significance of moral actions. We know only too well that politeness in society is in many cases nothing but the disguise of the human brute, and only in the best case an expression, even then exaggerated, of actual sentiments. But the reluctance to incur social disesteem surely leads also to acts which really belong to the sphere of the moral; to acts, for instance, of accommodation and helpfulness, of benevolence and generosity, of temperance, chastity, and decency, of respect and deference, and to the avoidance of the opposite vices.

With the subjection to custom from unwillingness to incur the disrespect of others, we have already approached the important group of motives which take their origin from our need of self-esteem. This need of holding ourselves in good esteem, of inquiring into our individual justification for existence, and of requiring that our being shall be a thing of some consequence, marks off man as a rational creature and distinguishes him from the animals. If I fear to be despised,—not on account of the social disadvantages connected therewith, but on account of the disesteem of others in itself,—then I fear at bottom, because, primarily, I make my own self-esteem dependent on the esteem of others, and because I am unwilling to sink in my own esteem, or even to doubt about my own value. This same need of gaining one's own esteem, primarily, as a reflection of the esteem of others, finds a higher and a positive manifestation in the need of honor and recognition on the ground of positive achievements and services. We do that which brings us honor, not only

for the sake of social advantages, but also from the profound and urgent impulse to acquire *value*, since we make our own valuation of ourselves depend on the estimates, real or supposed, of others. That the love of honor, however, and the craving for honor in considerable measure bear *moral fruit*, and that on this account the love of honor must be taken into consideration as one of the motives to morality,—this does not, I presume, require any further argument.

Akin to the love of honor is the “sense of honor.” The “man of honor” led by the “sense of honor” makes the law of what is becoming and seemly the direct law of his self-assessment; that is, he bows to it even where his conduct is hidden from the pronouncement of others; he bows to the law of honor in the fear of losing self-respect. To maintain this self-respect, resting as it does on agreement with a social code of honor, he will make the extremest sacrifices in substance, blood, or life. The man of honor seeks to have standing, not in the sight of others, but in his own sight; but, nevertheless, he measures himself by the established standard of a certain circle of society. This standard, however, has in it always more or less an element of the moral; for instance, integrity in business, courage, firmness of character, fidelity to conviction; hence the sense of honor, also, must be acknowledged as a motive to morality.

From the need of self-esteem, however, must also be derived the noblest and most significant among the really effective motives to morality—I mean *conscience*. Conscience is a mental and moral phenomenon not yet explained with any sort of unanimity; enigmatical in its nature as in its significance, not even unquestioned in its existence. When I am asked: Does any such thing as a conscience form part of the actual equipment of human nature? I answer: “Yes, in the exact measure in which man, as a rational creature, feels the need of ascribing a value to himself, and of gauging this value not in dependence on the judgment or standards of others, but directly and immediately by the one true standard of moral sentiment and moral intent.” Conscience is the craving for value, the craving for self-esteem in the highest and purest

stage of its development, in which value is not recognized save in that which alone possesses it truly,—the good will. He is in the highest sense conscientious who desires to be able to esteem himself, but only on the ground of this one absolutely justified standard of value. Thus conscience becomes a judge not merely of the acts, but of the most secret inclinations of the heart. The bad conscience with its retributions is the condemnation of self as valueless or worse than valueless, measured by the standard of goodness of will. The good conscience is the sense that measured by this standard one is *not* valueless. Thus conscience becomes a strong motive for the choice of the good as that which alone can impart value.

II.

Thus there is, in point of fact, a great multiplicity of motives present in human nature, which lead to the willing and executing of the good. When we turn now to our second chief question, the question whether by chance one of them should be singled out as that which is truly normal in man, there arises a preliminary query. Have we really any interest in searching for such a single motive possessing a sanction for all men? May it not rather lie in the nature of the ethical movement to throw the mantle of charity over the manner in which the good comes to be; to welcome to our midst all who bring to us a fragrant flower or precious fruit of ethical will and deed, and, as Frederick the Great would let every man be saved in his own fashion, to take our stand on the principle that with us every man may become virtuous in his own fashion?

Undoubtedly this does belong to the nature of our movement; but we should “do the one and not neglect the other.” We welcome every one whom the ethical interest leads to us, but we should not, in fulfilling our nearest and simplest duty, forget our remoter and more difficult one, the duty of seeking luminous and convincing insight into fundamental ethical questions; and to these fundamental questions belong precisely the quest for that impulse of the will which is more

especially influential in the establishment of morality. Such knowledge is in the end necessary for the individual among us, that his inner life may be made sure of itself, and for the movement as a whole, that its justification for existence may be definitively made good. I cannot hope to offer a result convincing to all, but it is surely something gained, even if nothing more is done than perpetually to point to the great problem and to keep the stream of discussion flowing.

What, then, is the standard by which we have to test existing motives? It is a threefold requirement that the true motive must satisfy. First, in regard to the arrangement of the world and the laws of the world's course, it may not make fantastic, visionary, and fabulous assumptions, but such as are sober and correct. Secondly, it must have a strong hold in the constitution of human nature; it must rest upon a strong need of our nature, so that it emerges in its effectiveness and attractive force wherever human nature unfolds itself in a normal development. Thirdly, it must not lead only to isolated manifestations of morality, but to the fulfilment of the moral requirement as a whole; and since this covers not only a multitude of outward acts, but also the inward unity of the moral sentiment, the impulse we are seeking must be capable of producing the will to shape the whole conduct and life conformably to the moral requirement.

It is possible only by the briefest indications to exhibit according to this threefold criterion the value of the several motives.

On the *first* of these three conditions the *religious motive* founders. If we find ourselves unable, on a true scientific view of the world, to look upon it as the work of a wise and good will, which at the same time prescribes for the human will the law of its behavior, then the world-basis ceases to be a determining factor in morality.

The formula "good for good's sake" is negated by the thoroughly egoistic constitution of human nature. Beyond question, in the life of every superior human being there are moments of exalted, enthusiastic, ecstatic feeling, in which every personal interest sinks down to abysmal depths before

an emotional life irradiated by a higher light; where the soul, snatched away out of itself, finds the centre of its existence in some revered being, in those it loves, in its nation, in all mankind, in some sublime idea; where, beside this high end, its own life is a very nothing. Nay, there may be inspired angelic natures with whom this self-transcendence is the abiding state in which they live. But these extraordinary states are not every-day matters; they are a holiday garment, which we must soon lay aside again; and these angelic natures are rare jewels, the conditions of whose existence afford no rule for the great body of mankind. Just as in the ecstatic community at Jerusalem there was not wanting the worthy couple who prudently held back for private use a piece of money from the field they had sold, so in the inner life of the individual, amidst the cymbal-beatings of enthusiasm, there is not wanting the sober partner who thriftily counsels one to bring one's own lambs in out of the wet. The principle of selflessness is no principle for daily life, no principle for the sensible, sober majority, who wrestle grievously in the struggle for existence.

Still, the force of impulsion that really sways the will is less flagrantly lacking to the principle of enthusiastic escape from self than to the principle of logical reasonableness. The consistency of our ideas is for our *theoretic* mental life of decisive importance; upon sentiment and practical conduct it cannot exercise this determining influence.

Thus these two last-named motives do not answer to the second criterion, the condition of proceeding from an actual propensity of universal human nature. On the other hand, this second criterion is favorable, though not always in the same degree, to all the other motives that we have to consider.

As for the principle of personal profit, it is true, as Frederick the Great so aptly said, that our own Ego is the secret object of all our endeavors and self-love the hidden principle of all our actions, which enlightens the dullest as to his interests. Even that fellow-feeling by which we feel the suffering of another as our own, and are impelled to put it, like our own,

out of existence, has a strong and permanent hold on human nature. Custom, too, is no less something real and actual. Does not man, in Schiller's well-known words, call habit his foster-mother? Can any one tear himself wholly free from the leading-strings of custom? Nay, do not many remain life-long altogether abandoned to its bonds? The saying, "*Jung gewohnt, alt gethan*," points to a law of human nature that, rightly applied, may prove of infinite importance for the moralization of our conduct. But the power of custom falls, to be sure, to wavering when man turns his mental eye to the conscious comprehension of his being, and the independent guidance of his action. Even he in whom habits are most firmly implanted will and should sometimes raise the questions, Why and Wherefore; and then the moment has come when habit must be supplemented by an independent principle of personal knowledge and self-gained conviction.

The inheritance of altruistic impulses, too, is undoubtedly a part even of the present condition of mankind and forms the ultimate support and deepest foundation of all the tendencies that make for the moralization of mankind. The power of this impulse among mankind to-day is, however, by no means so great that on the strength of it we could proclaim the dawn of a golden age, in which the saying would apply: all that pleases is allowed, for only that can please which is becoming. The altruistic impulse is, in respect of strength, incapable of measurement, at all events not sufficient for itself; operative, moreover, in different individuals with infinitely different degrees of strength. If we should give ourselves up to the hope that by a progressive accumulation of inherited habits the work of moralization of the nature would reach an approximate conclusion; this surely would be but a draft on a far, far distant future; and even in such a future we could expect our draft to be honored only if just those arrangements could be found which would inaugurate a steady, progressive ennoblement of human impulses, and an effective equalization of men.

The four principles still remaining have this in common, that they rest on the basis of our *instinctive need for self-*

esteem. He who submits to custom fears in the disrespect of others the loss of respect for himself. He who is devoted to his honor pursues, in the honor in which others hold him, the assurance of his own possession of value. He who acts in accordance with the feeling of honor does, indeed, measure his sentiments according to the testimony of his own consciousness, but he takes the standard for his own estimate from whatever may happen to be the views of the circles for him authoritative. Not until we come to him who is guided by conscience have we one who runs after no phantom form of value such as mirrors itself vaguely and shiftingly in the opinion of others, but strives for that true justification for existence which can be realized only in the will bent on bestowing happiness and blessedness on others. If among the deepest cravings of human nature the craving for self-esteem has a dominant place, if conscience is an endeavor to acquire genuine value for one's own personality, then to conscience, by the test of derivation from a strong and true natural craving, belongs the precedence and the palm as a motive to morality.

Still, there remains, for all those motives that have proved themselves among the realities of human nature, a further test in the condition that they must bring forth comprehensively and without restriction a complete moral fashioning of the will. Here the principle of enlightened egoism and reciprocity can advance, if prosecuted consistently and with the most refined sagacity, to the point of an unexceptionable choice of the good, since every good whatsoever done to others may redound to the good of oneself. Just one thing is denied to this principle: it cannot advance so far as to say, "I will do good because doing good as such seems to me true profit for myself." It will have good always solely on account of the various advantages, pleasures, and endowments that it brings for me in its train. The same foresight and calculating sagacity that lead here to the choice of the good, would lead elsewhere, with the same strictness of consequence, if guided by other opinions on the connection and course of human affairs, to a consistent desire for the evil. It is not the good

itself that here appears as a worthy end, but the various gains which we know as its concomitant phenomena.

Sympathy, moreover, would always find its confines and limit in self-interest. However powerful may be our sympathetic pain at the suffering of others, the conditions of one's own fortune work with a far more elementary force on the feelings and the will. Neither he who is in anxiety and want, nor he who is permanently embittered by the hard strokes of fate, is capable of sympathy. More than this, the sympathetic will is not in reality directed to the well-being of another, but only to the removal of its own oppressive and displeasing state. Should the object of the sympathy by a sudden annihilation disappear from the world, the motive of the fellow-feeling would be quite as much set at rest as by the cessation of his suffering.

Habit may become of universal importance for the desire and achievement of the good. As regards its effectiveness, there is in principle no limit set to it, though it will probably never, by human force, be brought actually to this pitch of perfection. Only one thing it lacks. It is a passive principle, a power which does not break forth from the inner nature of the personality. It cannot rise to a maxim. Who would make for himself the maxim : " I will act as I have been used ?" Thus it remains, for the establishment of morality, a provisional factor which awaits the completing and definitive factor.

Wholly incalculable in respect of the range of the resulting good is the *altruistic impulse* of our nature. Only in rare and exceptional natures, whose selflessness is an innate characteristic, in whom virtue is vested, as Plato says, by a divine dispensation, can it arrive at an all-sufficient completeness.

Inadequate and doubtful as regards the ends pursued are the principles of *subjection to moral custom*, of *devotion to honor*, and of *the sentiment of honor*. None of the three ever seek the good save in special and disconnected forms ; all three may, under circumstances, as chance surroundings decide, be diverted just as easily to the indifferent and worthless, nay, to the perverted and the vile, as to the genuinely good and salutary.

The good itself, that which makes for the salvation of others—the good in full compass without exception or restriction—is sought only by the motive of *conscience*. A will bent on all that is salutary to others counts here as the only thing that can impart to us, to the very kernel of our personality, value and sanction for existence. To strive by good will and deed after this personal value—this it is to which conscience urges us.

Let us now look at the outcome of this whole inquiry. *The strongest among the motives of higher human nature* is that which arises from our craving for self-esteem; its purest and best-sanctioned mode of operation is that which, aimed directly at the source of the real value of our being and endeavor, we find in *conscience*. *The most perfect and unstinted disposition to goodness*, again, is attained by the endeavor to acquire *in conscience* a true value for oneself, a true warrant for one's existence. If we wish, then, to have a maxim to guide our willing and doing consciously and deliberately towards the good, it can be only this: to entrust that craving to impart a true value to one's existence which manifests itself in the judicial voice of conscience, to give it unrestricted mastery over our purpose and endeavor. True value can attach to our being and striving only through their significance for the welfare of others; the endeavor to make our existence truly worthy will lead us the most forcibly to all good.

This sole dominance of conscience will, however, have strongly in its favor, from youth up, the by no means contemptible aid of habit. If habit, blindly operating with the power of a second nature, as well as the conscious endeavor towards true personal value which the law of conscience enjoins, exert themselves in the same direction for good, there cannot but arise from this double but united force a full measure of the desired effect. Habituation to goodness and a clearly conscious desire of goodness as the satisfaction of the craving to justify one's existence—this is, in my conviction, that combination of motives which will serve best and most surely to realize the ideal of the ethical man.

The philosopher Schopenhauer possessed an album in which

but one leaf was written upon. The leaf was from the hand of Goethe, and the inscription read :

“Willst du dich deines Wertes freuen,
So mußt der Welt du Wert verleihen.”

This saying contains, in the first place, the precious reminder that it is a strong need and interest of human nature to rejoice in its own value. But also a way is pointed out in which this end can be attained. To the great poet the means of gaining a joyful consciousness of one's own value was to confer value upon the world. He intends to admonish the young philosopher, morosely contemptuous of the world and men, that we ourselves are nothing else than a bit of the world and of mankind, and that we cannot possibly esteem ourselves if we misprize and scorn the world and mankind to which we belong. We could, however, in a freer rendering, understand the conferment of value on the world as consisting in the bestowing of valuable gifts and endowments on mankind through our ethical will. So understood, the apothegm would agree with the fundamental thought of these remarks; still more perfectly would it express this thought if, by an easy change of the words, we read it :

“Willst du dich deines Wertes freuen,
So mußt dir selbst du Wert verleihen.”

But the thought would attain still more distinct expression if we read,

“Dir selbst wirst wahren Wert du leihen,
Kann deines Thuns die Welt sich freuen.”

It is a feeble attempt to formulate in the narrowest compass a long cherished conviction on one of the deepest problems of ethics that I have offered you to-day. In the accomplishment of the great task of the ethical movement, the production of a systematic conception to be taught to the world, may it prove not wholly unfruitful.*

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* A fuller development of the thought contained in this paper may be found in my book entitled “*Philosophische Güterlehre. Untersuchungen über die Möglichkeit der Glückseligkeit und die wahre Triebfeder des sittlichen Handelns*,” Berlin, 1888.